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C O N F I D E N T I A L BELMOPAN 000120

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FOR WHA/CEN - R. BEAL
EMBASSIES ALSO FOR LEGATT, DEA, REGIONAL AFFAIRS, USMS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SNAR SOCI PINR BH
SUBJECT: BELIZE: FOREIGN MINISTER/ATTORNEY GENERAL POSITIVE
IN INITIAL CALL

REF: A. A) BELMOPAN 105 (NOTAL)
¶B. B) BELMPAN 108
¶C. C) BELMOPAN 109

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Dieter for reason 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Belize's new Attorney General and Foreign Minister Wilfred Elrington told the Ambassador February 20 that he did not see any major problems in the bilateral relationship. He seems likely to focus most attention on the justice system and less on his foreign affairs portfolio. Contrary to some older reporting indicating that he was anti-American, he went out of his way to talk about his family and other ties to the U.S. and to indicate that his view of the world has matured and become more nuanced. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Dieter had an initial meeting with Belize's new Attorney General and Foreign Minister Wilfred Elrington on February 20. Elrington was relaxed, talkative and candid and what was to have been a courtesy call touching on a few issues of substance stretched to over 90 minutes of relaxed conversation.

FOREIGN POLICY

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked the Minister for his assessment of the OAS-sponsored resettlement of Guatemalans from the village of Santa Rosa. Elrington said he had not yet received a briefing on the issue and called in the MFA action officer for an update. The GOB's understanding of the situation is that six families remain in Santa Rosa. Their houses are being constructed and they will be resettled on the Guatemalan side of the disputed border as soon as the housing is done. Other families were resettled in January and early February. The MFA official told us that he expects the process to be completed soon. The briefing completed, Elrington told the Ambassador: "Now you know what I know."

¶4. (C) On bilateral issues, Elrington said he did not see any major problems. He wanted to know about the upcoming Trafficking in Persons Report and said that the GOB is concerned not to run afoul of the U.S. on this again. He asked to be informed if we hear of any problems.

¶5. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about impending personnel changes, Elrington ran down a number of posts for us:

-- The GOB did not intend to make sweeping changes at its U.S. missions and would keep Nestor Mendes in Washington (it was not clear if it would be as Charge or Ambassador) .

-- Lois Barrow Young (ex-wife of the PM) would go to New York as PermRep.

-- The CEO (deputy minister) of MFA would be Alexis Rosado, former Ambassador to Belgium.

-- Chendo Urbino, a defeated UDP candidate, would be appointed Ambassador to Mexico.

-- The Ambassador in Guatemala and High Commissioner in London would remain.

-- Adelbert Tucker would be appointed non-resident Ambassador to Nigeria with responsibility for developing relations with Africa.

-- Ambassador to Panama Musa would be removed. "Cabinet is allergic to that name," Elrington said dryly.

¶6. (C) Elrinton's response to our Kosovo demarche was reported in ref A.

ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

¶7. (C) Elrington spent a considerable part of the meeting discussing issues that are within his Attorney General portfolio. He identified the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) as "really a mess," with a DPP who did not argue cases in court and who had health problems that kept him from work. In addition there had been political interference in cases and the DPP was "compromised" by some of his previous actions. The most effective Crown Counsel was on maternity leave and the government would probably have to bring in attorneys on contract to prosecute cases and

clear up the 400-case backlog.

¶8. (C) Elrington asserted that the previous government had deliberately undermined the justice system in a number of ways, including by appointing "incompetent" judges, several of whom he named for us. Case backlogs were piling up in part because the judges were slow and not productive. He indicated he would be looking at the possibility of removing some though he was not optimistic.

¶9. (C) The problem with the justice system, Elrington told us, "starts with the police. We need a new, new, new face on the police," and significant change in training and orientation. He suggested bringing in people from the outside and weeding out higher-ranking officers who were cooperating with "the criminal elite that runs this country."

He said he would explore bringing Belizeans working abroad in law enforcement back home, and that he also favored police training abroad to expose officers to cultures "where people are proud to be honest."

¶10. (C) Eliminating the culture of corruption was a major theme in Elrington's comments. He said that the Prime Minister was telling the UDP caucus that Belize had entered a different era. What the previous government got away with they would not. Having said that, he recognized that people were human and there would be a lot of temptations for the new members of the government. The key to success would be vigilance.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Although he has a reputation as something of a loose cannon, we think Elrington will be accessible and ready to listen. His candor is refreshing. He is clearly much more up to speed on domestic issues than international ones, and we suspect that he will leave much of the day-to-day running of MFA to the CEO and staff while he focuses on the justice system. We do not expect that he will continue pressing the efforts of his predecessors to have Belize play a larger role in bringing Caricom and Central America closer together, nor does he strike us as someone who will spend

significant amounts of time traveling abroad except when necessary.

¶12. (C) Like the Prime Minister and others in the new government with whom we have spoken, Elrington sees fixing the criminal justice system and the police as a top priority. You have to "eliminate criminals and straighten society," he said. We will encourage the GOB to take a more active role in the Merida Initiative, where our interests and theirs seem closely linked.

BIO NOTE

¶13. (C) Although some information linked Elrington to anti-American speeches in the 1980s, we saw no evidence of this in our discussion. In fact he made a point of noting how many members of his family lived in the United States and how successful they were there. He told us: "As you evolve you mature and see shades of grey." Elrington said that he had prospered in law over the years (he has practiced law for some 30 years) and owned significant amounts of property in Belize, including a development in Progresso, in northern Belize, with an American partner (www.progressoheights.com). He said that he banks in the U.S. because he does not like Belize's exchange controls.

¶14. (C) Elrington has four children. Two daughters have followed him into law and are with his firm. His son attended college in Chicago but apparently did not finish a degree and now works in the law firm as a process server.

¶15. (C) Elrington is the sixth of 14 children. He clearly admires his father who raised the family on a government salary and ensured that the children received good education. Music runs in the family: Elrington plays the tuba, as did his father. Other siblings and his children also play instruments as well. He described his weekly band practice as something he lives for.

¶16. (C) He has a reputation for being a political maverick. He abandoned the UDP to run as an independent in the 2003 election because he thought "the leadership was not democratic enough." In the 2008 election, he told us, he spent his own money and was beholden to no one. He told us that he never wanted nor sought a ministerial portfolio. "The prize is to make the country work efficiently. If the country does well then I and my children will do well." He strikes us as a sincere family man focused on a domestic agenda of law enforcement and judicial reform.

DIETER